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Timorese Refugees In Portugal

A COMMUNITY IN MOURNING

by Jill Jolliffe in Portugal and Pat Walsh

ACFOA and a number of its member agencies have taken an active interest in the plight of the Timorese refugees now in Portugal virtually since the time of their arrival there late in 1976. It was at the initiative of the NGO's that Mr Jim Dunn visited the camps there January 5-23, 1977. His report on that visit did much to publicise their situation in Australia. ACR made $20,000 available in 1977 to help meet the expenses of the refugees' immigration procefures, health assistance and child welfare. Action for World Development has compiled and circulated reports. And ACFOA has called on the Australian Government on a number of occasions to classify this small group as refugees and admit them to Australia on humanitarian grounds. The following account traces the origins, movements and problems of these forgotten refugees from the time of their displacement in 1975 to the present day, and reiterates their case for admission to Australia.

The two majority parties of the day, UDT and Fretilin, fought a short, sharp civil war in East Timor in August/September 1975. Many thousands of civilians – men, women and children, sought refuge from this conflict by moving first to the eastern border area of East Timor then across into Indonesian Timor as the fighting moved in that direction. At the conclusion of this war in September 1975 they were joined by several hundred defeated UDT troops, bringing the total number of refugees in Indonesian Timor to an estimated 20,000. Some stayed in the border zone but the majority assembled in camps set up by the Indonesian authorities at Atambua.

Twelve months in Indonesian Timor

Early in the civil war, the RAAF and two Portuguese vessels had ferried some 2500 refugees to Darwin. But as the civil war ran its course and escape routes by sea and air were cut off, Indonesian Timor provided the only sanctuary. UDT elements in particular expected Indonesia would shelter them because it was anti-Fretilin. Furthermore they expected their stay in Indonesian Timor would be brief as there was a feeling that Portugal would re-assert its authority and enble them to return. They were to be disappointed on both counts. Portugal did not restore its administration and Fretilin ran the territory as its de facto government. And the initial welcome extended to the refugees by the Indonesians soon turned cold when the refugees refused to co-operate with Indonesia's plans for 'integration' – plans that became all too ominous and explicit with the Indonesian invasion of East Timor three months after the refugees' arrival in West Timor. This refusal to co-operate cost the refugees dearly as the following account of their time in West Timor demonstrates.

The Indonesian authorities in West Timor allowed the defeated UDT troops access to Indonesian Timor only on condition that they signed a petition to President Suharto appealing for integration with Indonesia – a course they reluctantly took. Within 48 hours they were disarmed and stripped of any personal items of value. Otherwise the refugees were generally well treated and provided with facilities and abundant food supplies (though refugees allege there was significant misappropriation of food supplies by Indonesian officials who sold it to local Indonesians and poorly fed Indonesian troops). This was the situation from September 1975 to March 1976.

Hard times at Atambua

In March 1976, however, the attitude of the Indonesian authorities to the refugees took an abrupt change for the worst. This was pre-

cipitated by the refusal of the vast majority of the refugees to take part in a pro-Indonesia rally before Adam Malik, then Indonesian Foreign Minister, carrying Indonesian flags and requesting integration. The refugees were told that since East Timor was now part of Indonesia they were no longer 'refugees' and as such not entitled to special assistance. Six months of grinding hardship followed, so severe that a leading refugee from those times now in Australia did not hesitate to call it a 'holocaust' for his people. Food supplies were reduced, then completely cut off. To buy food, people had to sell belongings and carry out hard labour in ricefields and on construction jobs. The small returns these realised were not enough to buy adequate food. Many died. There were few medical facilities and the hospital was not available to the refugees. They were usually asked to pay from their meagre funds for services such as injections. The Catholic Bishop of Atambua and some of the Indonesian Timorese sympathised with their suffering and helped but the military was 'omnipotent' and alone had effective authority. Camps were supervised by armed guards and the Timorese were not allowed to move freely. This contributed to the general atmosphere of powerlessness as it was very difficult to hold meetings or make contact with the outside world. Efforts to contact Australia to arrange for immigration there failed. Their detention continued long after conditions in Dili and other centres in East Timor were said to be secure.

At the end of March the priests at Atambua were told by the Indonesian authorities their Bishop in Dili wished to see them. No such request had been made but their three-week visit to Dili, where they were horrified by what they saw and heard of the Indonesian invasion, was a turning point in their search for security. They returned to Atambua convinced there was no future for their people under Indonesia, either in West Timor or in Indonesian-controlled East Timor.

Escape to Portugal

Nevertheless the refugees claim they would not have been allowed to leave Indonesian Timor were it not for the intervention of the Portuguese Commission led by General Morais-é-Silva and the Netherlands Embassy in Jakarta. The Dutch Ambassador agreed to assist in their evacuation after receiving a hand-carried letter forwarded by the refugees in May 1976 in which they appealed to him for help as Portugal's acting representative (Portugal broke off diplomatic relations with Indonesia after the 1975 invasion).

The priests request to stay behind to continue their work was turned down with the warning that their safety could not be guaranteed if they remained behind. 700 Portuguese passports were also issued at that time for close relatives of the refu-

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The Portuguese Government intervened initially to secure the release of 23 Portuguese soldiers who were imprisoned in Atambua by the Indonesians after being brought there as prisoners by the UDT forces. They were used as a political bargaining point by both the Portuguese and the Indonesian Governments. The Indonesian Government agreed to sanction the evacuation of the refugees after General Morais-e-Silva argued that they too were Portuguese citizens and should be extended the same rights as the Portuguese soldiers.

The agreement, however, did not prevent the Indonesian authorities from circulating rumours amongst the refugees that if they applied for evacuation they would be killed. In fact two days before the Dutch Ambassador visited Atambua to finalise the evacuation arrangements, 7000 Timorese were forced to move back into East Timor denying them the opportunity to go to Portugal. They reportedly suffered badly in the harsh conditions at Batugade their destination in East Timor.

Of the estimated 5000 who, despite intimidation, asked to go to Portugal, only those who happened to be at Atambua between June and October 1976 were permitted to leave. This included a small number of Timorese and Chinese (approximately 25) who had paid bribes to travel from Dili to Atambua after the Indonesian invasion. This group of 1400 (the exact figure was 1392 according to the Commissariat for Evacuees of the UNHCR) travelled to Portugal in several contingents during September-October. Some were transported direct to Lisbon by the Portuguese airforce. Others went by boat from Atapupu to Kupang, took planes to Bali, and were then taken to Lisbon by Garuda Indonesian airways.

gees to be flown to Portugal. Most of these people were in Dili, and have not been allowed to leave. Most of those who either chose not to leave, or were not allowed to, eventually returned to East Timor in one way or another.

Those who did go to Portugal did not want to leave their country. But their 12 month experience had persuaded them that all Atambua and Dili could offer them and their families was continued suffering and insecurity. Attempts to get to Australia had failed. Portugal offered the only realistic, though they hoped temporary, alternative. And so they went into exile 20,000 miles from Timor and Australia, gratefully, but nevertheless under duress as refugees.

The situation in Portugal today

Today, five years after civil war and then invasion caused them to flee their homeland, most of Portugal's 1600 East Timorese still live in refugee camps on the outskirts of Lisbon. The refugees are scattered over eight different centres, all run by Portuguese Red Cross. The main concentration is at Balteiro camp, 200 kms from Lisbon, where several hundred Timorese live alongside refugees from Angola and Mozambique. The Red Cross provides free food and housing for the unemployed, and has recently built new houses within the camp for those who have work and can pay rent – a minority. The rest live in shanty houses. A river polluted by refuse from the camp runs nearby.

Most of them have no future – at least not in Portugal which rates as one of Europe's poorest countries. Inflation and unemployment are rampant, the cost of living high.

The Quinta do Balteiro camp illustrates the primitive conditions in which 1600 Timorese refugees are living in Portugal.

Some 500,000 'returnees' who fled to Portugal from Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau when independence came to these former colonies, have placed added strains on the depressed Portuguese economy and because of their better job qualifications they often outbid the Timorese for scarce jobs.

Afflicted by the suffering of their families in Indonesian-occupied Timor, and living in impoverished social conditions with only bleak prospects ahead of them in Portugal, they are sustained by two things: the hope that the Australian Government will allow them to live and work in Australia, and a highly-developed community structure which keeps traditional values alive and ensures every refugee is cared for.

Most East Timorese receive regular news of the war in Timor, from family letters (usually censored, but some escape the censor) and from the regular stream of new arrivals who have bribed their way out of East Timor. There are few people who have not lost friends or relatives under the Indonesian occupation. Some letters simply list deaths and dates. A person interviewed recently, from a coffee-growing village in the central mountain district, received a letter from friends telling her she was the last surviving member of her family. Huddling with thousands of others in the dark coffee plantations — in fear of the Indonesian army, but out of reach of food supplies — the whole family had died of starvation.

Life in the refugee camps

In this context, the task of keeping alive the spirit of this mourning community is a full-time one. The Timorese Refugee Commission (CRTP) operates from Balteiro camp under the leadership of Father Apolonario Gutteres. Its tasks range from repairing family quarrels, finding work for the many unemployed, organising traditional festivals, ensuring that the most needy refugees (usually single parent families) are receiving adequate relief aid, to issuing press releases about the war in Timor.

The Commission also subsidises Lisbon's only Timorese restaurant, a wholly refugee venture launched on a loan from Caritas, but which has since run into misfortune, including a large robbery from the premises, and is threatened with closure for lack of financial backing. The Commission gives high priority to supporting young people to stay in school — community leaders regard education as an important weapon in the struggle to survive. All hope, despite the ravages of the country under the Indonesian occupation, they will one day return to an independent East Timor. They have a perspective of training the youth for future national leadership. There is concern about the breakdown of traditional values. Many young people are unemployed, and finding it difficult to cope with an urbanised society drastically different from their own. The Timorese are a crime-free community, but family problems are increasing — pregnant daughters and runaway children are a new problem. In some cases tribal courts still judge family disputes, but for young people traditional values are less meaningful today.

Although most refugees agree that life in Lisbon is privileged compared to the ordeal of their families in East Timor, their hopes for the future do not focus on Portugal in economic or cultural terms. The Timorese do not

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Timorese refugees' plea to be admitted to Australia

Eastern Timor, for the people of that beautiful land, is today a lost Paradise. Peace, rest, tranquility belong to the past. War, hatred and uncertainty have deprived our lovely homeland of all the necessities of life. Now it is a deserted island, abandoned, isolated, solitary. Now, when jet planes, telecommunication and technological power have eliminated distance and isolation.

So, today the people of Timor are doing all in their power, by every means at their disposal to immigrate because the land of their birth is no longer their Paradise.

Invoking the humanitarian principles of Pancasila which the Republic of Indonesia scrupulously adopts as a norm of life, we ask her to respect the life and physical integrity of our brothers as well as the will of those who wish to immigrate.

As for those who are now in Australia we can only offer them our congratulations for having settled down so well in the community of that blessed land while we express our sincere gratitude to the Australians for the friendly welcome and generous hospitality given to our brothers. This generosity has extended even as far as the Timor refugees in Portugal by means of the substantial donation sent to the Service of Catholic Migration and destined in a special way to pay the expenses of the immigration procedures, health assistance and child welfare.

As for the 1,600 Timor people now resident in Portugal, no one can count on security for the future. All live at the expense of the Portuguese Government. With half a million coming from the ex-Overseas Colonies the Government is just powerless to cope with the problem of unemployment. For this reason we, about a year ago, appealed to the Australian Government to open their door to us. Our first appeal was made by means of a letter published by the illustrious journalist Cameron Forbes in "THE AGE" of November 1976 and again through the honoured members of the Australian Government who visited us and recalled the happy comradeship and spirit of solidarity shown by our people during the Second World War.

Our desired goal is AUSTRALIA which shelters the greatest community of Timor people now exiled from their native land. It is our preference among many nations not only because of its geographical affinities but especially because of the exemplary treatment afforded to our brethren already settled down there. These we hope and pray will take care of new arrivals and, in a short time, from their own experience guide and direct them towards a perfect integration. We lament to have to say that of the 1,600 petitions for immigration to Australia, up to today, only a little more than 200 persons who happen to have relations there, were granted. This number constitutes 1/8 of the total. Considering that 7/8 of the refugees do not have the requisites necessary for immigration we now appeal directly to the Christian Families of Australia to take the responsibility with AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRATION for the entrance of Timorese families.

The Timor family is profoundly christian and united.

There are families who need to educate their children and all desire to reconstruct their way of life. This will only be possible if they are economically independent. This ambition can only be realised through immigration to Australia.

So, we leave this our appeal to the consideration of the Christian Families of Australia and we thank in anticipation all those among the thousands of Christian families in whose generous hearts this appeal will find an echo.

(Signed) Father Francisco Maria Fernandes
PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION OF TIMOR REFUGEES IN PORTUGAL
25 March, 1978.

regard Portuguese culture as their own. It is alien and far removed from what they have known. They think of themselves as Timorese and only as Portuguese in the technical sense.

Let us come to Australia

The over-riding ambition of most of them is to come to Australia to join the Timorese here who now form the biggest community of Timorese outside East Timor. This has been their aspiration from the beginning. The journalist Cameron Forbes reported in November 1976:

"In tent after tent people who are asked simply what they wanted to do say, simply, 'go to Australia'".

This was their wish even in Atambua but circumstances then left them no choice but to go to Portugal.

Their reasons for wanting to come to Australia can be summarised as follows:

1) reunion with families and friends – many have relatives among the 3000 or so Timorese already in Australia and of course value the extended family very highly.
2) better prospects for employment and a new life – they know Timorese are well-accepted and can find factory work easily here.
3) Australia's geographic and climatic affinity to Timor.
4) A general wish to live not very far from Timor with a view to re-establishing contact with friends and relatives when access to the territory is eventually permitted by Indonesia. Timor is only 350 miles from Darwin, a short plane trip.
5) a sense of comradeship and feeling that we owe them something because of collaboration in the Second World War against Japan. To quote Fr Francisco Fernandes, Chairman of the Refugees in Portugal, speaking in May 1978:

"It is natural to want to go there. Not just because it is close to Timor . . . but because we have been friends and neighbours in the past. During the war against the Japanese, we helped Australia, especially in the fighting. Thousands of Timorese

died. Now we are in a difficult situation and we are asking for Australia to help us".

Australian Government response

What has been the Australian Government's response to this case for admission?

To date the Government has rejected the Timorese argument for special consideration.

According to an Australian Government "Green Paper" on immigration and refugee policy, "Australia recognises that people can be in a *refugee-type situation* and merit sympathetic consideration although their status has not been officially recognised by the UNHCR (Chap. 5, page 39, emphasis added). It has not, however, extended this "sympathetic consideration" to the Timorese or accepted that it has an obligation to them as refugees. Along with the UN, and Portugal itself, Australia does not classify them as refugees, preferring instead the term "quasi-refugees" or "evacuees". Under the UN charter on refugees, a person cannot be a refugee in his or her own country. Thus the Timorese — who are legally Portuguese citizens — cannot be refugees in Portugal, although by any human standard they are clearly refugees and their experience testifies to this. They certainly think of themselves as such.

Second, the Australian Government has applied selective criteria admitting only those with immediate family in Australia or professional qualifications. The former Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Michael MacKellar, explained it as follows in a letter of 26.4.1977:

"I have decided that admission of East Timorese in Portugal may be approved if they are:

a) nominated immediate family members of Australian residents, i.e. spouses, dependent children, parents and fiance(e)s;

b) nominated non-dependent sons or daughters and brothers or sisters of Australian residents or applicants where special circumstances are evident. They will be exempted from the normal occupational criteria provided they are able otherwise to meet the remaining migrant requirements; or

c) applicants able to meet the normal personal and occupational criteria.

The normal health and character requirements must be met and visas will be granted only to persons intending permanent settlement in Australia".

It should be noted that section b) of this quotation which permits the sponsorship of brothers/sisters and adult sons/daughters or applicants where special circumstances are evident, represents a relaxation of the normal criteria. This relaxation was terminated in February 1979 because the Immigration Department considered it had "fulfilled its purpose".

To date about 500 out of the original 1400 who came from West Timor in 1976 have been settled in Australia on the basis of these criteria.

Other refugees have moved out of the camp after finding work or gone as emigrant workers to other parts of Europe. Refugee numbers rose back to the original 1976 total last year with the arrival of around 650 Timorese-Chinese who paid bribes to Indonesian officials to be allowed leave Timor. Some of these new arrivals are eligible for Australia because they have family here, and are merely waiting for applications to be processed.

There still remains, however, a hard core of several hundred East Timorese who want to come to Australia but are not eligible.

In view of the conditions under which they now live and the relatively small numbers involved, it is high time all these unfortunate people were offered the chance to immigrate to Australia.

The immigration dice are loaded against the Timorese being accepted as ordinary immigrants. Coming from underdeveloped East Timor, very few have the skills or qualifications generally sought after in modern, industrial Australia. Some are attempting to acquire these skills. Alberto, for example, although a white-collar worker all his life first in Dili and now in Lisbon, last year did a bricklayer's course to try and qualify himself for Australia. He is still awaiting acceptance. Rejection on this basis, however, would not seem to take into account the fact that unemployment amongst the Timorese already in Australia is virtually non-existent, despite the state of the labour market, and the fact that few Timorese with good qualifications have managed to find employment here consistent with their skills and previous experience.

The Lypinto family have four children of their own, and custody of two teenage children orphaned by the war. Mr Lypinto is diabetic and cannot work, and each winter seems colder than the last in their poorly-heated hut. He receives a pension of around $70 a month, and his wife does embroidery to supplement their income. The eight of them live in a hut ten by seven metres divided into four rooms. They have no running water and the electricity supply from the main camp generator often fails. Mr and Mrs Lypinto have many cousins in Australia, but this does not alter their situation — in Australia's eyes they are neither refugees nor eligible to enter Australia as ordinary immigrants.

The Australian Government has rejected the Timorese case for admission to Australia. It has chosen to ignore the reality of their refugee status and the claims that Timorese have on us by reason of our historical and geographical links. It has opted to do things by the book.

The largest community of East Timorese outside Timor is now located in Australia and so it is understandable that the majority of the Timorese in Portugal should wish to come here. In view of their long-standing aspirations which they have clung to with little encouragement, and the terrible reality of their refugee experience from 1975 until today, and in view of the conditions under which they now live and the relatively small numbers involved, it is high time all these unfortunate people were offered the chance to immigrate. O